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KNOWLEDGE, BELIEF AND REVELATION: A REPLY TO PATRICK LEE

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In a recent issue of *Faith and Philosophy*, Patrick Lee argues that religious belief in the fact of revelation, identified as the fact *that God reveals*, is based neither on knowledge nor on belief in testimony. He develops an alternative account of religious belief as "reasonable conviction." In response, I argue that his arguments on the first point fail, and I also raise objections to his alternative account. I show that the rationality of religious belief can be based on knowledge in a way which Lee overlooks, and that it is analogous to the rationality of non-religious belief in an important way which Lee is forced to give up.

In "Reasons and Religious Belief,"[1] Patrick Lee argues that the rationality of religious belief is owing neither to knowledge nor to belief on testimony, either human or divine, but to "reasonable conviction." In this "Reply" I show first that his arguments against basing religious belief on knowledge or on divine testimony fail. Then I raise some objections against his alternative account of religious belief as "reasonable conviction." My own view throughout is that the rationality of religious belief can be based on knowledge, on the direct knowledge of God, a possibility which Lee does not explore and which his arguments do not rule out. This view has the advantage of restricting the object of religious belief to *what God says*—the content of the revelation, and it thus also preserves an important analogy between the rationality of religious and non-religious belief which Lee is forced to give up. I also think this view is closer to the Biblical view of religious belief.

In his abstract Lee identifies the object of religious belief as both "that God has revealed and that what he has revealed is true."[2] It becomes clear in his discussion, however, that he takes mainly the first of these, *viz.*, "that God has revealed" as the critical object of religious belief. *That* is "the fact of revelation" which is "the principal thing" which believers accept and non-believers do not. "Before one accepts p, it seems one must first accept that God has asserted p—the fact of revelation."[3] How important it is to keep these two things distinct—*that* God reveals and *what* he reveals—will soon be evident.

Lee begins with an example of the rationality of *non-religious* belief. He tells how he himself believes his colleague, Professor Jones, one Friday

afternoon when Jones tells him that one of his students named Smith stopped by that morning to see him when he was not in. The example is one of *belief*, says Lee, because he cannot *know* the proposition about Smith, either by perception or by inference from any evidence Smith left of his having been there; nor, of course, is it self-evident. Furthermore, it is an example of *rational belief* because it has a basis: the trustworthiness of Jones.

Commenting on his example, Lee says "it appears that I have a choice. I could believe Jones or not."[4] But this is not always the case. We do not always deliberate over what we are told by those whom we know, and know to be trustworthy; and I assume that, in his example, Lee knows Jones and that he is trustworthy. Let us overlook that point, however. For Lee is right that sometimes, at least, we must deliberate over whether to believe someone, even a friend whom we know to be reliable; for example, he may tell us something which conflicts with one of our other beliefs. On some occasions, certainly, we must also deliberate over whether to believe a stranger. So believing (or disbelieving) a fellow human being *may* involve choice.

Still—and this is a critical point—even then (perhaps especially then) *rational* belief is entirely compatible with knowledge, both knowing *that* someone says something for us to believe and knowing that *person*, in particular, knowing that he is trustworthy. Notice that the non-religious belief situation has the same two parts as the situation of religious belief: *that* someone says something and *what* someone says. Notice also that the object of *belief* is the second part: what someone says. Notice finally that the *rationality* of *believing* this object actually depends upon *knowing* the first part (that someone says something) plus, of course, who it is and that the person is trustworthy.

But, says Lee, there is an "important disanalogy" between religious and non-religious belief. Indeed, "with religious belief the situation is reversed." What is "obvious" (clearly known) in *human* testimony is "that the witness says p." What is not always obvious is that the witness is "veracious in saying it."[5] By contrast, says Lee, what is obvious (clearly known) for divine revelation is *only* the conditional statement: "that if God asserts p, then p must be true." The fact that God asserts p is in doubt: "What some doubt, and what seems to require a choice to accept, is whether God does in fact assert p. Before one accepts p, it seems one must first accept that God has asserted p—the fact of revelation."[6] What is obvious in non-religious belief (Lee knows that Jones is the speaker) is not obvious in the case of religious belief ("some doubt...whether God has asserted p—the fact of revelation").

At this point Lee sees a problem. And no wonder, for Lee has *removed* the very familiar basis for a belief's being rational in the case of human testimony from the case of divine revelation, *viz.*, knowledge of the speaker (God) himself. This is the result of Lee's having made the first fact in the situation (*that* God speaks) the object of belief (actually, doubt) instead of the second

(*what* God says). But he does not think this first fact can be known. Not that nothing can be known. What can be known is that *if* God speaks, what he says is true; but such knowledge is worthless unless we know first that God speaks. Can we know that? Can we know that in fact God has given a revelation? Not by any demonstrative proof, says Lee; "the argument against this is conclusive."[7] On this point I agree.

Lee also offers the following argument against the *possibility* of knowing the fact of revelation:

> If one has knowledge of the fact of revelation then, it seems, one's acceptance of the revealed truths is not faith but knowledge. If one has knowledge that, a) God is truthful (or, more modestly, that if God asserts p then p is true), and b) God has asserted p, then the conclusion that p is true is an instance of knowledge, not belief.[8]

The argument assumes that just because someone can rightly *infer* the truth of a proposition from something known, the proposition cannot be an object of that person's *belief*. But I think the assumption is false. People can even *doubt* such propositions. As we just saw, even though Lee might infer from Jones' trustworthiness that what Jones says is true, Lee could doubt what Jones tells him if what Jones said was in conflict with something else Lee believes.

The same is true for religious belief. Consider the case of Abraham. On several occasions Abraham *disbelieved* God's promises to him that he and Sarah would have a son and that his descendants would inhabit the land of Canaan (Gen. 15:8; 17: 17-18). Did Abraham doubt God because he did not know it was God who made these promises? Or because he failed to make the inference that if God says p, p is true? Nothing in the story suggests an explanation of his doubt along these lines. The story suggests instead that Abraham had trouble *believing* what God said *even though* he knew it was God who said it. And his trouble came from the fact that God's word went against other beliefs Abraham held, beliefs based on his own reason and experience. So Abraham had to make a choice between what God said and what he inferred from his own (non-religious) experience, and on these occasions he preferred the latter. Unbelief may just be doubting the veracity of God. That is why, in this case, religious unbelief is irrational, for what God says cannot be false while what we think on the basis of "our own reason and experience" can.

Of course, Abraham also chose on some other occasions to believe God. Most notable is the occasion when God commands him to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22), for then God's command went against not only his conscience but even God's own earlier promises. The all-important point, however, is that Abraham's faith (as well as his doubt) is entirely consistent with his *knowing* God and that God said what he did say—the fact of revelation. Thus

Abraham's situation is altogether analogous on that point with the non-religious situation of Lee's believing Jones who tells him about Smith. All we need is a theory of how Abraham knew it was God speaking to him. One theory that seems to fit is that Abraham knew the fact of revelation by simply experiencing it. Lee does not explore that possibility.

In fact, on the Biblical view (as I understand it), the correct human analogy for religious belief is not the relationship between philosophical colleagues (God is not our colleague), but the relationship between a child and its parents. The child's problem is not that he does not *know* his parents, that they are trustworthy, and what they require, but that the child sometimes just chooses not to listen to what they say. That is because the child can be obstinate and want to follow "his own ideas" about what to believe and how to behave. So, too, according to the Bible, we are God's children, but children who often resist his authority over our lives because of our sin. When by his grace we choose to believe what he says instead of the way things look to us, based on "our own reason and experience," this is entirely consistent with our knowing the fact of revelation, that God tells us what he does tell us. Indeed, that knowledge is the basis of the rationality of our belief. On this view of religious belief, therefore, Lee's problem about knowledge of "the fact of revelation," that it obviates belief, disappears. For the object of religious belief is not the fact of revelation—*that God reveals* but the content of revelation—*what God says.*

Lee also argues against the possibility of accepting the fact of revelation on the basis of testimony, human or divine. Against accepting the fact of revelation on divine testimony, he says:

> But to accept the fact that God is giving testimony on the basis of God's testimony is obviously not rational. If one is asked, "Why do you believe so-and-so," and one replies, "Because so-and-so himself said he is trustworthy," the reply could scarcely be taken seriously.[9]

But why isn't it rational to accept someone's testimony to his own trustworthiness? Suppose a man is on the witness stand, and responds at one point to a persistent cross-examination by saying, "Look, I have told you the truth, I'm an honest man." One of the jurors, when later asked by another juror why he believed the witness's testimony, could sensibly reply, "He also said he was an honest man, and I believe him." Again, it is part of a person's last will and testament that he testifies to his "being of sound mind and memory," which would be pointless unless he expected others to believe it. Again, when the Pharisees complained that Jesus bore witness to himself, Jesus did not deny it, but reaffirmed it (John 8:14-18), which implies he meant it to be taken seriously. The author of 3 John comes close to vouching for himself when he writes "and you know my testimony is true" (3 John 12). "And he who sat on the throne said..." to

the author of the Apocalypse, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true" (Rev. 21: 5). So there is nothing necessarily odd about testifying to the truth of one's own words, and expecting to be taken seriously when one does.

Why, therefore, isn't it possible for human beings to accept the fact that God gives testimony, either about himself and his faithfulness or about other things, on the basis of God's being his own witness? That is indeed what the Bible represents Noah, Abraham, Moses and David doing when they accepted the covenant which God established with them (Gen. 9; 17; Ex. 24; Ps. 89). The Bible portrays anyone who believes God (not just the prophets) as accepting God's covenant, God's own testimony to human beings about himself, his promises and his faithfulness (Jer. 31; Heb. 8-9). Believing God's testimony about himself and his faithfulness to his covenant may be seen as the heart of biblical religion. So Lee's argument against accepting the fact of revelation on the basis of divine testimony also fails. In fact, accepting the fact of revelation *just because* it is *God himself* who testifies to himself in the Bible will also account very well for the *certainty* of religious faith, which Lee rightly says is essential to it.

Lee argues next that religious faith cannot be based on human testimony: "The reason is this. For belief to be rational it must ultimately be traced back to someone's *knowledge* of the matter. Now, first, it is not at all clear that any human persons have or had *knowledge* that God has in fact given a revelation."[10] Earlier we saw Lee argue against this possibility. But if knowing that God has given a revelation is not possible, then the Biblical reports that the prophets and apostles knew the fact of revelation are mistaken.

No wonder, then, that Lee wavers in his view that no one can know God has given a revelation when he goes on to say:

> ...the only human beings [prophets and apostles] who could plausibly be said to *know* that God has given a revelation are quite far removed from us in time. Therefore, if human testimony were the basis of one's certainty about the fact of revelation (setting aside the derivative case of children and simple people) then that certainty could not be as firm or strong, reasonably, as religious believers claim that it is or should be.[11]

He wavers in his view because it seems to conflict with his description of what he thinks it might mean when "Christians claim that they believe God himself." He *wants* to understand this claim on the analogy of his example of believing Professor Jones after all:

> Christians claim that God has spoken through the words and deeds of prophets and of his Son, and that these words and deeds are handed down to us by the Church. ...It is like the example of believing Prof. Jones. However, what God has done and spoken is handed down to us by messengers and mediators. For this reason it is more like believing Jones but hearing what he has said through a messenger, say, his secretary (or the secretarial pool).[12]

But then, of course, Lee cannot *connect* the religious belief of Christians today with divine revelation except by the tradition of human testimony, and this tradition will not account for the certainty of religious belief. Hence his argument against basing religious belief that God has revealed himself on human testimony.

Lee's problem here seems to be something like this. If only the prophets and apostles knew the fact of revelation, we today can only believe that fact on their testimony (which has been handed down by the Church). If we can only believe that fact on such human testimony, we cannot account for the certainty of religious faith. Therefore, our religious faith must arise in some other way. So far so good. But if our religious faith arises in some other way, the religious faith of the prophets and apostles must have arisen in some other way also, since no one (on his earlier argument) can know the fact of revelation. With that reasoning, as I have said, I disagree. Let me now discuss Lee's other way.

That other way is "reasonable conviction," which Lee defines as "accepting with certainty a proposition for the sake of a good which the belief of that proposition, together with its truth, if it turns out to be true, will help or enable one to realize."[13] Lee illustrates such belief with an example adapted from William James:

> Suppose a man is mountain climbing, and has climbed to a dangerous spot from which he can escape only by jumping across a wide chasm. The evidence just on its own indicates that it is probable, but only probable, that he will make the jump (I am changing James's example slightly, for my purposes). But if he believes with certainty he can make it then his chances are greatly increased. It seems to me that it would not be wrong for him to try to induce in himself the belief that he will make the jump. To choose to believe this, or to choose to try to believe it, does not seem irrational. Such an act does not seem to violate one's duty to seek truth and avoid error. (If one's success in jumping were wildly improbable, then it might violate one's moral duty in regard to truth; but on our supposition it is probable that he will succeed.)[14]

This analysis of the rationality of belief combines a calculation of what is probable with a deep desire to attain a great good.

Even the calculation of what is probable, of course, is a kind of knowledge. This shows, if nothing else, how very difficult it is to exclude knowledge from the basis of rational belief. The point of religious belief as "reasonable conviction," however, is that it goes *beyond the evidence* in a way that evidentialists like Clifford, Russell and Flew regard as irrational. What saves its rationality in spite of this for Lee are two things: the respect for truth (the mountain climber believes only if the evidence is probable that he will make the jump) and the desire for a great good (the climber saves his life if indeed he does make the jump).

My objections to Lee's account are two. First, he believes that religious belief as "reasonable conviction" is protected from the evidentialist objection because it finds a way of legitimizing going beyond the evidence in the prospect of achieving some good. But even granting the legitimacy of thus going beyond the evidence, the evidentialist objection will still have its foot in the door. For notice that for his belief to be rational, the climber must first determine that his making the jump is *probable on the evidence* he has before him; thus he must still be an evidentialist. Likewise, someone who considers whether to believe the fact of revelation will have to investigate whether the fact of revelation is probable *on the evidence*. But that question is very much in dispute among those who have considered it. Bertrand Russell can still say, when, after dying, he is asked by God why he didn't believe, "Not enough evidence, God! Not enough evidence! Not enough evidence, that is, on which it was even probable, when I was on earth, that you revealed yourself to earthlings, that the fact of revelation was true." So I don't believe Lee answers the evidentialist objection after all, as he thinks he does.

The second objection is that religious belief does not seem to be based on desiring some great good. Again, the case of Abraham is relevant. It does not seem that Abraham chose to believe that God spoke to him because he still wanted children by Sarah in their advanced age, as the mountain climber believes he can make the jump because he desperately wants to save his life. To be sure, one way of describing the great good which God offers human beings is, in Lee's words, membership in "a community of divine and human persons (called 'the Kingdom')." But do unbelievers become believers because they desperately desire such a good and have calculated the probability that such a community is one of the things God has revealed? I'm not convinced. It does not seem like the faith of Abraham, by which Abraham trusted God and not his own reasonings and desires, and which God "reckoned to him for righteousness" (Gen. 15: 6). There may well be a place for belief as "reasonable conviction" in human affairs, but I don't see that it offers reliable clues to the nature of religious belief or its rationality.

I have cited the case of Abraham because St. Paul calls him the "father of all who believe" (Rom. 4: 11). Abraham's faith might therefore be a better paradigm for Christian faith than William James' mountain climber. Christians must *believe* what God reveals about many things (e.g., the creation of the world, the incarnation of his son in Jesus Christ, or that Jesus is coming again) precisely because they cannot *know* them, either directly by experience or indirectly by proof. As Paul says elsewhere, such things "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived" (1 Cor. 2: 9). Still, Paul goes on here to say:

> Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed upon us by God. And we

> impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit. (1 Cor. 2: 12-13)

To be "taught by the Spirit," why isn't that to hear God speak? And to hear God speak, why isn't that *knowing* God, and more precisely, *knowing* the fact of revelation itself, i.e., knowing *that God reveals* what the believer hears? In this way, then, religious faith, believing what God says, is rational because it is based on the knowledge of God and that he reveals himself.

As for the question whether only the prophets and apostles can plausibly be said to *know* that God reveals, I think Kierkegaard was correct when, pondering the story of Abraham, he said that "he saw no reason why the same thing might not have taken place on a barren heath in Denmark."[15,16]

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NOTES

1. Patrick Lee, in *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 6, no. 1 (Jan. 1989).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), p. 9.
16. I am grateful to William P. Alston for his helpful criticisms of the first version of this Reply.